

Bonds of Fate

By Jason P. Crawford

Samuel Buckland Chronicles Volume Two

Bonds of Fate

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THE INVADERS

Jambres crowed, his laughter and jubilation echoing over the luminescent landscape of the Heavenly city as he flew through the air. He pointed his swarthy hand at the retreating backs of the defeated Archangels—bleeding golden light, their radiance flickering as they withdrew—and dark energy began to swirl about his fingers.

“Enough.” Another hand closed about his, with the same skin. Both men’s robes flapped in the warm breeze of the celestial sky. “They are defeated, brother. Do not forget why we are here.”

There was a moment of silence; Jambres stared into his brother’s determined eyes, and the only sounds were the tinkling of their ensorcelled amulets in the wind.

“...You’re right, Jannes.” Jambres lowered his gaze back to the two Archangels, who had stopped their flight and landed near the stairwell leading upward into the realm. “We have more important things to do.”

Jannes clapped his brother on the shoulder and pointed upward. Amongst the stars of the Heavenly sky, a subtle ripple distorted the twinkling lights. Jambres nodded and the two raised their hands, drifting upward toward the disturbance. Each man clasped his hand around one of the pendants at his neck as they entered the vortex.

There was a shocking sensation, a swimmer hitting an unexpected pocket of cold water, and then they were through. At once, the pair had their hands up in defensive posture, waiting for the inevitable attack.

It did not come.

“Where are they?” Jambres cast his eyes around the new terrain; instead of the levels of city the pair had passed through, they stood in a single, vast room, lit by ever-burning candles and effusive sunlight filtering in through the ceiling. Gentle music wafted in through great archways and windows, and there was a small table in the middle of the room, with a steaming pot of tea and setting for three.

Jannes and Jambres approached the table. Jambres ran a hand over the hardwood of the chair in front of one of the settings.

“What kind of trick is this?” Jannes put one arm in front of his brother. “Touch nothing.”

Jambres pushed the other's arm aside. "It's a *chair*, Jannes. We have fought *angels*. Why should we fear a chair?"

"Indeed."

The voice echoed off the walls and floor, a deep, sonorous sound that startled the two Egyptian sorcerers.

"Who are you?" Jambres's hands flared once again with magic. "Show yourself!"

"Of course."

Standing across the table from the brothers was a slight figure—beautiful, as all angels were, but lacking the stature and magnificence of the defeated Archangels. He wore a soft, shimmering robe of samite cloth trimmed with golden and silver embroidery. His lips curled in a gentle smile, and he extended a hand towards the two men.

"Please, sit." Two spirits resembling winged children materialized and stood behind the other seats, pulling them out from the table and waiting. "I think we have many things to discuss. It is not often that Heaven is graced with powerful sorcerers such as yourselves."

Jannes sneered. "Do not think to deceive us, angel. We will not be fooled by your flattery."

The angel shook his head and took a seat. "I do not flatter. Deception is impossible in Heaven. It has been made apparent to the Father that force of arms will serve no further purpose." He laced his fingers together and leaned back in his chair, eyes appraising the two standing before him. "As you can see, I have no weapons. Please, sit. I know you are thirsty."

There was another pause as the two brothers looked at each other. Jannes licked his lips and his head turned just a bit from one side to the other. Jambres cocked an eyebrow at his brother, then threw himself into the seat before him, grasping the mug of steaming tea.

The angel's smile grew broader, and he motioned with his hand for Jannes to join them. The sorcerer moved more slowly than his brother, easing himself down and breathing in the vapors of the tea before sipping.

His eyes widened.

“This...this is amazing.” He took another sip and looked toward Jambres, who had already drained his and was reaching for the pot to refill it. “What is it made from?”

The angel held up a hand and one of the attendants moved in to fill Jambres’s cup before he could do so. “Manna. In Heaven, it can take any form, and nourishes both flesh and soul.” The angel sipped at his own cup and moved his eyes from one man to the other.

“I suppose it must be asked. Why are you here? Why have you climbed Heaven and fought through Archangels?” He glanced behind the brothers, who followed his gaze to a great opaline stairwell stretching up through the ceiling. “Do you seek audience with the Father?”

Jannes opened his mouth, but Jambres was quicker. “Your prophet, Moses, defeated us in a duel of magic several years ago before our Pharaoh. We have spent those years seeking out lore and spells from all over the world that would allow us to overcome the power he showed that day.” The sorcerer sat back, his smile triumphant. “And we have done so.”

“So it would seem.” The attendants refilled more cups. The warmth of the tea revealed itself in the two men’s faces, which began to sweat as they drank. “What does this prove? You cannot defeat the Father. He is beyond worldly challenges, beyond any attempts to overthrow Him.”

Jannes’s smile was smaller than his brother’s, but no less proud. “That is what Moses told us then, about your God and the angels, but we have proven him wrong.” He wiped the sweat from his brow. “Your best warriors have fallen before the magics we have learned and mastered. Even if your God destroys us, we have still done what none have done before—reached the throne and challenged His power.”

“It has been done, once. The outcome was not pleasant.” The angel motioned again and the two attendants stepped up behind the magicians. “Gentlemen, I can see that the tea is making you too warm. If you would hand your cloaks to my servants...”

Both Jannes and Jambres glanced at the children standing behind them, then slipped their hands up to the collars of their red-brown cloaks. Their fingers ran up over the chains of the amulets they wore under their collars, and they reached back to unfasten the clasps.

The angel watched them, his eyes steady, his countenance pleasant.

Jambres took the heavy golden amulet, set with a great ruby and inscribed with mystical symbols, and placed it on the table before him in easy reach. Jannes stretched forth his hand as well...

And his face blanched.

“Jambres! Put it back on! The spells –”

The angel rose, expanding to a full twenty feet in height with giant purplish wings. He waved his hand, and, in a flash of golden light, Jambres was hurled from his seat and through the wall, his screams dwindling as he plummeted through the celestial plane toward Earth.

Jannes held his amulet out toward the monstrous angel, who turned toward him, eyes full of Heavenly fire. His words shook the air and the ground as he spoke.

“Go with your brother, sorcerer. Go now and you may yet save him from your folly. There is only you here, now, and you cannot stand against the Voice.” The angel’s hand clenched and another golden blast detonated against Jannes. He coughed and blinked his eyes, but his pendant had taken the worst of it, the edges blackening and cracking.

“Go now.”

Jannes’s eyes danced between the angel and the hole his brother had made. His head dropped, and he nodded, rising into the air and flying along Jambres’s path. Angels and spirits watched as the sorcerer fled, and a great cheer went up through the first four levels of Heaven.

The Metatron, the Voice of God, sat back in his chair and sipped his tea.

THE KEEPER

Samuel Buckland rubbed two fingers against the bridge of his nose, took a breath, then addressed the young man sitting across from him.

“All right, Vincent. When you’re ready, tell me about...what happened.”

The teenager nodded, licking his lips. He glanced at his questioner from behind his unkempt blond hair, smoothing it back, fidgeting, taking a drink of water.

“Well, Mr. Buckland, it went like this.” The boy rubbed his hands over his wrists, where the ghosts of several angry, straight-edged wounds were visible. “I...I was just looking out the window, you know, and...” Another sip, a clearing of the throat. “And I saw Ilianna downstairs. She was...was...”

A momentary flash of irritation crossed Sam’s face, but he mastered it quickly. The hand that Sam placed on Vincent’s was covered in black runic tattoos, a script that a scholar might recognize as reminiscent of ancient Hebrew text. His gaze drifted from the boy’s face to his left shoulder as he spoke. “It’s all right. Take your time.”

Vincent nodded, running his hand across his mouth. “She was just...just making out with this other guy, you know?” He clenched his fist. “She was *my* girlfriend, man. At first, I got mad. Real mad. Wanted to go down there and...” He hesitated, eyes flicking up to the man across the table.

“You wanted to kill them, didn’t you?”

Vincent’s eyes were wide, gazing into his water glass as if it were a scrying pool. “Yeah. I did. I could see the look on her face as I choked her, man. I could see the other guy turning and running before I smashed his head in with a rock or something.” His fingers wrapped around the glass, his knuckles turning white. “I mean, I could see it...and, goddamn it, I wanted it so bad.”

Sam nodded, his eyes still looking over the teen’s shoulder, toward the doorway. “What stopped you?”

Vincent laughed, but did not raise his head. "I'm not sure. I was standing there, seeing it, wanting it and then..." He waved his hand, dismissing the statement. "I don't know, man."

Sam turned his face back. "Did it feel like someone else's idea for a moment? Like someone was whispering in your ear, that they weren't your thoughts?"

Vincent's head jerked upward, his eyes wide, lower lip trembling. "Y...yeah. Yeah, that's what it was like, like a snake in my ear. I freaked out, slammed my hand against the window, cut myself to shit."

"Try again, Vincent."

Vincent nodded, rubbing his upper arm with his uninjured hand. "Cut myself bad. When I felt the pain, it was like it went right through the anger, and I started crying, man. That's when everyone came running into the classroom."

"I see." Sam reached to his side and grasped a small notebook, taking a few moments to jot down something. He didn't look down at the paper, his eyes still dancing between Vincent's face and left shoulder as his tattooed hand drew the pen across.

God, how many of these are you going to send me today?

He laid the pen down and leaned forward again.

"Vincent, I think that it's important to know that this was not your fault." He put up a finger to quell the start of the teenager's protest. "There isn't anything wrong with you. You'll need some more counseling, someone to help you work through these feelings."

"Mr...Mr. Buckland?" Vincent looked away for a moment, then back at his companion. "How can there be nothing wrong with me? You know...you know that this isn't the first time something like this has happened? I've -"

"You've hurt people. I know, I read all of it." Sam gestured with one hand to the file folders on his desk nearby. "But I also know that you won't be doing anything like that anymore." A glance at the clock on the wall. "All right. I know it sounds like the stereotypical shrinks in the movies, but our time is up. I hope I'll see you again next week, but I expect you'll be feeling much better by then." He stood, and the child followed. Sam extended his left hand.

"See you then, Vincent."

Vincent scrunched his eyes, cocked his head. His hand came halfway up, then paused, quivering, in mid-air.

Sam waited.

Vincent's eyes reopened, but their color had changed to a smoky-red, the whites criss-crossed with blood vessels. "Mr...Buckland...I..."

Sam took another breath, then lifted his right hand, palm toward the boy. "It's okay, Vincent. It's okay."

His face turned to the boy's left shoulder once more.

"Begone."

The demon, the scabrous, four-armed and no-legged imp that was clinging to its host's head and spewing vile poison into his mind, shrieked as its flesh began to bubble and dissolve under the force of the exorcism. It spat and hissed, its ethereal fingers searching for purchase in the flesh of the boy's neck.

With a faint odor of sulfur and a last wail, the creature was gone. Vincent shook his head like something was caught in his nose.

"Vincent? Are you all right?"

Vincent's eyes were their normal brown again. "Yeah." For the first time since he had come into Sam's office, he smiled. "I'm...I'm actually feeling a lot better, Mr. Buckland. I think you're right. I think everything's going to be okay."

Sam returned his smile, but his was wan, weak. "That's right, Vincent. Take care of yourself, and let me know if you need anything else, all right? You have my number and my email."

Vincent nodded, patting the phone in his pocket. With another wave, he was out the door, and Sam waited for the *click* before collapsing into his chair.

He shook his head, rubbing the fatigue from his neck and sighing. A glance into the glass pane of the coffee table revealed the deep black and blue circles under his eyes. "Am I even making a difference?" He cast his gaze upward. "There's just...there are so *many*. Always someone new."

He stood again and dragged himself to the cappuccino machine standing in the corner of the office. He punched in the buttons that would deliver his caffeine-laced

nectar and returned to his desk. His email was lit up with new messages—queries about patients, appointments, departmental meetings—but he closed the window and navigated to a folder titled “Journal.” With a few button presses, he opened up a new document and titled it “October 27th—Day 771.”

As he typed, he let himself drift away from his keyboard, his mind translating the press of letters into speech. His office dissolved, faded, until it was replaced by a grassy green field, clear, blue sky, and a gentle summer breeze. He sat on a checkered blanket, talking.

As he spoke, Gabriel smiled, listening, comforting.

I hope you can hear me...well, you know what I mean. Has it always been this bad? This many people? He laughed. Did Gramma ever have bad days like this? Where she didn't know if she was making a difference or not? I almost hope so. It would help me feel like I wasn't alone.

Sam stared for several seconds at the blinking cursor on the screen before his fingers moved again. *Would you believe that part of me is wishing for another apocalypse? Another threat? At least then I'd be making a difference.* His typing grew faster, more frenzied. *It's like I'm beating my head against the wall here—I know that small things add up but I'm not getting to see it, I'm not getting to celebrate their successes. They're here and they're gone, and I know it'll be important in ten years or so but –*

The imaginary Archangel's frown brought him up short. *No. That's wrong. It's important now, and this is selfish of me. I just need to keep pressing on.*

Sam's eyes panned back over to the huge list of appointments and conferences that he was due to attend. He closed his eyes and pressed the intercom button on his desk.

“Yes, Dr. Buckland?”

“Greta? Can you bring in the schedule for tomorrow?”

She hesitated. “Dr. Buckland...”

“Thanks.”

He released the button and allowed himself to go back into his imagination. *Every one is a small victory. Every one a small triumph for Heaven. I think...*

“Dr. Buckland?”

He opened his eyes again, focused on his secretary's face. Greta held the appointment schedule under her arm, but made no move to deliver it into his outstretched hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Sam? Can I...can I talk to you for a minute? As a friend?" She fidgeted in place.

Sam furrowed his brow and leaned forward. "Of course you can."

"Good." She tossed the schedule on his desk. "You've been booking yourself solid for the last six months, if not more. I can't remember the last time you didn't spend a vacation at the office." She crossed her arms and shook her head. "You even came in for a few hours last Christmas!"

He held up his hands. "You can't fault me for that one. Don't you remember? It was Caesar Rodriguez. He was having symptoms of dissociative—"

Greta slammed her hands down next to his, forcing him to suppress a startle. "They're *all* special, Sam. I've been at this longer than you have, and I know what it does to people. You start off as an idealist, a crusader, thinking that you can change the world...and then it wears you away until there's nothing left but someone who's coming in and prescribing medicine so they can keep getting paid." She pulled up and sat in the chair, staring into his face. "You're the best damn psychiatrist that I've ever seen, Sam. You have a great success rate. Your patients have nothing but praise for you. You even manage with cases that everyone else has given up on." She reached out, her dark red nails a sharp contrast to her light skin, and took his hand. "But you're killing yourself. I see it, everyone else sees it. You need to take a break." Her hand released his and she leaned back in the chair. "And don't tell me that you're fine. Because I know you're not."

Sam shook his head. "I don't get that luxury, Greta. If I don't help these kids, no one else will."

She barked a laugh. "Who do you think you are, Superman?" He looked up, startled. "Even he took time off, you know."

He bowed his head. *Maybe she's right.*

"So, where do you want to go? I've already cleared it with the other doctors and Social Services; they'll cover your caseload for a week or two."

"You did, did you?" Sam raised an eyebrow. "What if I said no?"

Greta crossed her arms, matched his eyebrow with her own, tapped on her upper arm with her index finger.

“Fine, fine. I’ll go.” He rocked back in his chair. “You twisted my arm into it.”

“What a fantastic idea, Sam. Do you want me to set up the travel arrangements for you, or not?”

He shook his head. “No. I kind of want to play it by ear, just go where the winds take me.” He felt a pang as he spoke, and his memory brought forth the image of a creature of mist, with booming laughter and a generous nature.

I miss you too, Sky King.

“All right.” The twinkle came back into her eye, along with her stunning smile. “Enjoy your vacation!” She turned and walked out, and Sam sat back in his chair, eyes still shut. His fingers ran across the arms of his seat before settling, and he let out a great exhalation, filled with accumulated stress.

I hope that this helps. I hope that I’ll come back and be like I was when I started. I hope that...

He was still listing off hopes when sleep draped a soft blanket over his mind and took him, leading him to a picnic in a grassy field while his cappuccino cooled in the machine.

THE CHILD

“We’re going *where*?”

Sam suppressed his irritation as his adopted daughter scrunched up her dark-skinned face like she had just tasted something rotten. “We’re going to Jerusalem, Sara, for a visit. To see the sites of ancient religions, like the Holy Temple.” He smiled to himself as his mind sketched the itinerary. “We might also head to Mecca and Medina, see the Ka’aba.”

Sara scratched her head and flipped off her iPod, removing the headphones from her ears. “Um...why? I mean, not that I mind the time off of school or anything, but it’s the middle of the semester. It’s not even break time yet.”

He sighed as he took his laptop bag from his shoulder, hung it on its appointed place on the wall, and began removing his shoes. A golden pendant slipped out of his shirt as he bent down, and he tucked it back into place. “Do you really want to head to another country over the Christmas break? I figured you’d want to stay home, hang out with your friends, that sort of thing.” He crooked an eyebrow in her direction. “If you’ll recall, last year I tried to get you to go to Italy and you shut me down.” He padded over to the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of orange juice. “So you get to miss school this way, and you won’t even get in trouble.”

Sara pursed her lips and tapped her foot. “I did *not* shut you down. You just forgot that I had other things already planned.” She leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. “Besides, you were going for some sort of meeting. When I asked if we would have time to go see anything, you told me...” Sara brought her hands up to make air-quotes. “And I quote, ‘Probably not.’”

“I...” He took a deep breath as he poured his juice. *Patience*. “Well, this time there’s no meeting. So, do you already have something planned?”

“Well...no.”

“Okay then.”

“So it’s a real vacation? Like, us going, looking around, seeing new things?”

Sam nodded.

Sara's smile burst forth. "When are we leaving?" She took a seat at the kitchen bar. "All of my friends are going to be jealous when they hear."

Sam winced, his muscles and joints aching as he sat down at the kitchen table. "Our flight is for tomorrow afternoon. Get yourself packed because I'm going to be picking you up after school and we'll be heading straight to the airport."

"Is there a reason we're going?" Sara cast an appraising eye over her adoptive father, who glanced up at her from his downcast face. "Not that we need one, but...well, you don't usually take time off yourself, you know. You're always rushing off to some conference, some event..."

"Yeah." Sam sipped his juice and rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe that's why I need to go. Been trying to do too much, even for me."

"Oh, please not the 'genius' thing again." Sara rolled her eyes and turned, grabbing a tangerine from a nearby bowl. "I know my friends laugh every time you say that, but seriously. It gets old. You don't need their attention *that* badly."

Sam took a sip of his drink. "Trust me. I'm not looking for the attention of teenage girls."

A moment of silence stretched before Sara spoke up again. "Well, anyway, guess I'd better get packed. I don't want to forget anything I might want while we're in the Promised Land."

Sam nodded and leaned back. *This is going to be good for us.* He closed his eyes and cast his mind back, back to when Gabriel had touched his heart with that moment of divine vision. The overwhelming, desperate love that had engulfed him then echoed back at him now, and tears trickled down his face.

"...Sam?"

Sam blinked his eyes open; Sara was watching him from across the table, her brow wrinkled, concerned.

"Oh, sorry." Sam wiped his face and eyes. "Just remembering something from a few years ago."

Sara got up from her seat. "In the immortal words of Qui-Gon Jinn, keep your mind here and now where it belongs."

“And who am I to argue with Qui-Gon?” Sam polished off his juice and stood up, stretching his arms in front of him.

“So when are you going to tell me about your days in the voodoo cult?” Sara pointed at the tattoos on his hands and forearms.

“When you’re old enough to not have nightmares.” Sam adjusted his sleeves so the markings were mostly covered.

Sara’s eyes widened and her mouth dipped in a scowl. “Fuck you.” She stormed off, slamming the door into her room. The sound echoed through the house, a gunshot in the silence.

Sam didn’t even look up. Instead, he rolled the glass between his hands.

“That was fantastic, Sam.” Light reflected off the moisture beads. “Way to go.”

She doesn’t need to know. It’d be too much for her. She’s just a child.

“And you would have reacted *real* well if Mom or Dad had told you that when you were her age, huh?” He stood and brought his glass to the sink, running water over it and putting it into the dish rack. Wiping his hands on a nearby towel, he turned to face the hallway that led to Sara’s room.

A stray thought brought a smile to Sam’s face. *Funny how this is harder than facing down the Angel of Death.* He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and headed down the hall. Before knocking, he leaned in and put his ear to the door.

Nothing.

He rapped his knuckles on the wood. “Sara?”

Something hard slammed into the door on the other side and thumped onto the ground.

“Right.” He sighed, rubbed his forehead, put it against the door and closed his eyes. “Sara, I didn’t mean that exactly the way it sounded. You’ll hear all about it one day. Just...just not yet. It’s not the right time. All right?”

No answer.

“I’m sorry.” Sam turned from the door and began his return trip down the hallway, but before he got halfway through, the door opened.

“Apology accepted.” Sara leaned against the doorframe, her arms crossed again. “But only because you’re bringing me to Jerusalem.”

Sam laughed. “Fair enough.”

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“I remember when airlines let you check two bags free per passenger.” Sam shook his head as he and Sara walked away from the counter, taking a bite of his napkin-clad chocolate donut before continuing. “Now it’s fifty per.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that, Sam.” Sara hitched her small carry-on backpack up on her shoulders as her eyes roamed the airport. “It makes you seem old.”

“I feel old.” Sam also took in his surroundings, but what he saw was not the same as what Sara did. To his left, several scuttling spider-demons, about a hand-span in size, scabbled toward a nearby line. Ahead, a security supervisor berated an employee, holding her in place with his authority as his taunts and insults lashed into her soul. Sam could see the tears leaking down her freckled face...and the barbs on the tongue of the fat man before her.

He paused, watching. The air around the supervisor shimmered, a heat-wave undetected by everyone else, and, as Sam’s attention focused in, he could smell rotting flesh and brimstone.

*Dammit. Even when I’m trying to go on fucking vacation.*

“Sam? What’s the matter?” Sara turned around, looking at him stopped in the middle of the walkway, people flowing around him like water in a stream. “Sam?”

“Just a second, Sara.” Sam watched a moment longer. *A taskmaster. Hate those bastards. Making abusers out of people.* He set his shoulders, then began walking toward the pair, tossing the donut in the trash, unfolding the napkin, and scribbling on it with his pen.

“What are you doing?” Sara’s eyes flicked from Sam’s face to the TSA man, whose face was now red with anger. Everyone else in the crowd was doing a fantastic job of pretending to be deaf, turning their eyes away from the spectacle going on in the airport lobby.

“No, Sam, you can’t. Just let them—”

“Stay here, Sara. Don’t move.” Sam put out one hand to block her, then stepped up to the employee and boss. The woman was fully weeping now, babbling apologies, and Sam’s heart broke for her.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” He clicked his pen shut and returned it to his pocket, then put that hand on the young woman’s shoulder. She looked up at him, her face a war between anger, fear, confusion, and embarrassment, and the big man in front of her rounded on Sam.

“What the hell is your problem, asshole?” The supervisor rose up on his toes, trying to look down into Sam’s face. The barbs on his tongue were clearer, now, and Sam flinched at the sight of the sick, green ichor which coated them. “This isn’t any of your fucking business! Why don’t you just—”

Sam put his right foot back, widening his stance. “You know, you should really watch how you talk to people.” His left hand gripped the napkin. “You never know when someone is going to turn out to be more important than you thought.”

The TSA man reached out and shoved Sam, rocking him in place but failing to dislodge him. “Shut the fuck up! I don’t give a rat’s ass who you think you are; there’s fucking work to be done and this bitch—”

Sam shoved the napkin into the man’s face.

Scrawled on the thin paper was a complex diagram, a series of pentacles, circles, and other symbols. The other man’s skin blanched, going from red to white in a moment, and his next word emerged as a whispered hiss.

“Keeper.” He tried to withdraw but his muscles were locked in place. Sam stepped up to him.

“No shit, asshole.” He brought his right hand up, two fingers extended toward the demon.

“Begone, taskmaster. Your term here is ended. Return to Hell, where your feet bleed and burn and the whip you hold tears open your own flesh.” He placed the napkin on the half-bald head in front of him.

“Begone.”

The thick thorns on the man's tongue melted into the same green fluid which Sam had seen, pooling, running out of his mouth and up his face, soaking the napkin through until it was a sodden green rag. Sam plucked it from the now-speechless supervisor's face and flicked it into the air, making a sharp gesture with his left hand as he did so.

The napkin burst into flame, eliciting a gasp from the surrounding crowd, many of whom had stopped to watch the interaction between Sam and the supervisor. Sam glanced around, smiled, and touched the girl's shoulder again.

"Wh...what's going on?" The supervisor rubbed his head, as if he still felt the wet napkin on it. "I...I...Greta, are you okay?" He moved toward the young woman, who recoiled from him.

Sam shook his head, and turned to walk away. The onlookers whispered as he went past them back to where Sara stood, her eyes wide as an owl's, staring up into his face.

"I just explained to him that he should be nicer to his employees." Sam's words interrupted Sara's attempts to form any sort of question. "Come on, we need to get to gate six."

The rest of the trip through the airport was quiet, with Sara stealing glances at her father every chance she got. *It's not her fault.* Sam tried not to look back, to return the stares. *You'd be curious, too. You'd be staring.*

"Ummm...Sam?" Sara's voice was meek, quiet. "What the fuck was that?"

"Can it wait until we get on the plane?" Sam did not turn as he spoke. "I really don't want to miss it."

"I guess." Sam spared his daughter a look; she had retreated into the classic posture of self-defense, her arms crossed across her chest as her eyes held to the ground. The stone walls he had erected to keep out judgment and whispers crumbled, and he stopped, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey." Sara stopped, still not looking up. "Look at me for a second, okay?"

Sara did so, her brown eyes meeting Sam's. They were wide, shaking, searching his face.

"I promise, I'm not crazy. There was just something that I had to take care of, and I did."

Sara licked her lips. "Then what the hell was that?"

"Sara, do you remember that show we watched together, 'Mind Control'?"

She looked up at Sam from the corners of her eyes. "With that Darren Brown guy? Where he made people do all sorts of weird shit."

"Exactly. He was using psychology, tricks of how the mind works." Sam felt the bite of the lie in his chest, but he forged ahead. "When you need to get someone in a suggestible state, you do something that throws their mind off track. Something unexpected."

"...Like throwing a napkin on their head?" Some of the tension had left Sara's muscles, and her posture was loosening.

Sam smiled. "Exactly." *God help me, now I feel like Caitlin, grinning in front of a fawning crowd.* "It shook him up, let me talk to him for a second, give him a suggestion."

Sara's eyes had become saucers, all fear and confusion gone in the wake of this new revelation. "You can hypnotize people? Why the hell didn't you tell me about that before?" Then her eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute. Have you ever hypnotized me?"

Sam laughed, and this time it was genuine, a rich, warm sound from the happy places in his heart. "No." He waved one hand as he spoke in an attempt to calm her down. "Now, can we keep moving? I don't want the security people coming by and telling me that we shouldn't be blocking the walkways or something."

"Okay, okay." They resumed their walk. They had been moving for about thirty seconds when her voice came again. "So...can you?"

"Hypnotize people?"

Sara nodded.

"In a fashion, but I prefer not to." Sam stood up and he and his daughter began walking again toward their terminal. "The skill does come in handy during therapy, though."

"I bet. Must be nice." As she walked, Sara grasped hold of an imaginary clipboard. "Yes, all this deep-seated abuse from your childhood is gone. You'll walk out of here as sunshine and roses. Congratulations."

Sam shook his head. "No, Sara. That's not quite the way it works in psychology. I'd be wasting my time and theirs if I tried that kind of treatment for most of them."

The two arrived at the boarding area for their flight and sat down. “What do you mean, ‘wasting your time’? Why would that be wasting it?”

Sam laid his bags on the floor in front of him. “Solving people’s problems for them doesn’t help them get any stronger. He pursed his lips. “I try to...to remove the obstacles that are getting in their way and then let them figure it out. Not to take the easy road, you know?”

Sara cocked her head. “Whatever. Just seems like you’d be able to help more people that way.”

“Yeah.” Sam laughed, shaking his head. “It does seem like that, doesn’t it?”

